

A literature review helps the researcher by:

- Placing your tentative research problem in the context of your field and related fields
- Gathering information about what is already known about the topic
- Identifying 'gaps' in the knowledge
- Helping to limit or refine your research
- Suggesting methods and design for research
- Suggesting ways of avoiding difficulties or deficiencies
- Helping to interpret results

A successful literature review:

- Presents an overview of relevant research
- Says why and how the study will contribute to existing knowledge
- Provides a commentary on the literature in your field
- States what you plan to do to expand existing knowledge
- Highlights the similarities and differences between your work and the work of others
- Locates the research problem within a theoretical framework and reviews the underlying theory

The reading process

- Begin with the up-to-date, the well-known and general introductions to your topic (if they exist)
- Read with a purpose - know why you are reading and how it could contribute to your thesis (it's easy to get off track)

- Be disciplined about reading only what is relevant
- Prioritise your reading
- Devise a personal notetaking system
- Develop the discipline of reading and taking notes rather than photocopying to read later

Managing the large amount of information

- Devise a system of filing articles and references
- Keep careful records of source ideas, papers, quotes etc
Using bibliographical software can help e.g. Endnote

The writing process

- Read literature reviews - ask your supervisor to recommend good ones
- Outline your ideas before you start - themes, questions, propositions, logical steps in an argument
- Draw a diagram or mind map of relationship between ideas
- Write summaries of individual sections (you can delete these from the final version)
- Write regularly
- Talk about ideas before, during and after writing them down - organise a group of fellow students and have regular sessions when you can share and clarify your ideas
- Get regular feedback on what you write - from a naïve reader, from a peer in the same subject, and from your supervisor - ask them to give you feedback on something specific e.g. for clear writing style, or clarity of ideas and concepts